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## The Brown Apartment Building

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## **The Brown Apartment Building**

The man with a trumpet for a mouth was trying to sing again. Or it could've been the elephant, though then again, one could exist and thus eliminate the possibility of the other existing. No one in the brown apartment building really knew if the elephant that always seemed to be just in the next room over was the man with a trumpet for a mouth or its own entity. Mr. Grimace, however, had seen the elephant once or twice, though he did have a bad habit of spending much of his time in a different plane of existence. That was why none of the tenants of the brown apartment building trusted his word. Besides, it was difficult to understand him because his words were always curly from the way they had to twist themselves to escape from his perpetually thinned lips, frozen in an expression of mild discomfort and disgust. This was where his name came from, of course; he always looked like he had narrowly avoided stepping in sun-dried dog poop, or the shedded wings of the small, insect-like bats that were the only other eyes in his apartment besides his own--visitors from his favorite plane.

The man with a trumpet for a mouth was not a good singer, an unfortunate side effect of his facial structure, much like his irritated ideas that he should legally change his name to The Man With A Trumpet For A Mouth because everyone called him that and not his real name. However, when he vocalized these ideas, the tenants responded, animalistic, to the mild aggression in his voice but not his actual words. Besides, whenever anyone mentioned something to do with laws or legality, the tenants' eyes (and some had many) glazed over as they mentally shuffled through the millions of laws they had brought with them to the brown apartment building. All these laws had collided once in a very brief but very chaotic (and very interesting and very lively) period known as The Clash of Laws.

Now, the only laws that governed the brown apartment building were these: the autonomous law that stated all tenants had to do what they must to live in peace (occasionally ignored, as one could expect), and the second, rather cosmic, law that stated there would always be more walls and infinite, doubling corridors in the building than the universe should allow.

Mr. Grimace felt the need to disobey the first law, and so set out to find the elephant who was happily trumpeting away right next door. Of all the tenants, the elephant was the most content to abide by the laws. The speaking gargoyle that lived on the top floor was the least, and he was also the reason Mr. Grimace felt the need to disobey the first law--it was time the speaking gargoyle finally trusted his word that the elephant was not the man with a trumpet for a mouth, and if it came to a fight, so be it. Mr. Grimace did not suffer pain, only war with his words as his grimace worsened. Logically, he knew that picking a fight with a stone speaking gargoyle was not a bright move, but more importantly, he knew that fluorescent lights hurt his eyes anyway.

He stepped into the outside corridor, turning around to lock each lock on his front door. He had six locks to which six different keys fit, but one lock was faulty, as was considered lucky in his second-favorite plane. Once he was finished locking his functional locks and not locking his broken lock, he reached down to pet the shaggy animal that lounged on his porch day and night. Yes, he had a porch. Once, he'd accidentally entered a 1950s American television show and fallen so in love with white picket fences and quaint rocking chairs that he demanded a porch be built for him, complaining his way up to the owner of the brown apartment building. The owner of the brown apartment building had a great amount of extra things, which was why he used dim, non-offensive lighting in his office. He had an extra ear on the back of his head, an extra pair of arms, extra-thick glasses for his extra-bad eyesight, and an extra row of teeth, which Mr. Grimace envied because it made for a brilliant smile. Not a

comforting smile, because his extra teeth crowded the normal ones the way unpleasant men crowd you at a bar to let you know you've somehow offended their buddy--after a couple thrown fists, they'll inform you that there was something wrong with the look on your face. So while it was quite frightening to demand something from the owner, Mr. Grimace kept at it.

Now he had a porch, a small realm in which a five-legged and extremely large animal mostly slept. It woke for pats as Mr. Grimace left, and he always wondered what its face looked like--its shaggy cream-colored fur was so shaggy, in fact, that it completely covered the animal's face. He would approach it while it was sleeping and sift through the fur if not for its huge, gracefully curved, and very pointy horns. He had once witnessed the animal get too excited over a pat and accidentally spear one of the insect-like bats. Or at least, he hoped it was accidental. He'd been rather fond of that particular bat.

The elephant continued to make a racket, causing the Cane family to smack the walls in response. Though they lived on the bottom floor, everyone in the brown apartment building was able to hear them. They were always so vengeful, and seemed to enjoy the strange way sound always carried. Mr. Grimace suspected that the extra walls acted much like telephone wires, picking up sound and transporting it to everyone else. He also suspected that it would create a wonderful sense of community if not for the general irritation this caused many of the residents, especially the group of humans on the second floor. At least, they claimed they were humans; they had two legs, two arms, the proper amount of digits, and most importantly (as stated by themselves), an air of disapproval towards outsiders and an unwillingness to mix in with the other tenants. Too bad their toes were their fingers and their limbs weren't quite where they were supposed to be.

Mr. Grimace began to follow the singing. The eyes of paintings

followed his progress. He attempted to nod cheerfully at them, though they didn't seem to like it when anyone, regardless of how cheerful and non-grimacing they were, acknowledged them. As he walked past them, they rolled their eyes at each other as if to say, "Here *he* goes again." This gave the corridor a dizzying quality, as most of the creatures in the paintings were covered with eyes. This was a tribute to the Many-Eyed Monster, who was very jovial as long as one didn't make eye contact with the eyes not on his face and as long as one didn't remark on the lack of other Many-Eyed Monsters in the world. However, he often frequented the minibar on the ground floor, and after a couple drinks, he enjoyed getting up on the chairs and making impassioned speeches about how often he received dirty looks (which was very often) and how unfair and grotesque this treatment was. Mr. Grimace had been told many times that it was truly a sight to see; the humanoid monster standing atop a chair with arms thrown wide, so impassioned that even the eye on his tongue glared at those who dared to risk a snicker.

Mr. Grimace reached the end of the Many-Eyed corridor and decided to take the false corridor going to the right instead of the real corridor going to left. For Mr. Grimace, this was no problem; he could just walk through it while stuck in the In-Between, a place he didn't normally inhabit as it functioned mostly like a door between planes. However, if he wanted to walk through solid things, like the wall of a false corridor, he had to concentrate on staying in the In-Between instead of crossing directly into a different plane. Besides, he always found it easier to follow sounds in places that didn't really exist. Planes tended to confine sounds, dull them down so they could be contained. And in the In-Between, the man with a trumpet for a mouth's singing seemed to sound an awful lot more like an elephant. Of course, Mr. Grimace did believe that the man with a trumpet for a mouth existed, but he also believed that the elephant existed as well, and separately, furthermore. He was just sick of the speak-

ing gargoyle abusing his gift of clear, intelligible speech to say such unintelligent things as “The elephant does not exist.” The speaking gargoyle sounded like stone when he spoke; he had a low but forceful voice like the crunch of gravel underfoot. Whenever Mr. Grimace had a conversation with him, his grimace worsened. Mostly because the speaking gargoyle’s beliefs were always too firm and unchangeable—he refused to even listen if anyone said something that differed from his own views.

So proving the speaking gargoyle wrong was very important to Mr. Grimace.

After an indefinite amount of wandering the In-Between, ear cocked, he reached a spot in which the singing intensified. He closed his eyes and concentrated on the correct plane... If he took a step to the left, he should appear in the room from which the sound emanated. He took a deep breath, held it, stepped to the left, and opened his eyes to pitch black and pins and needles filling his entire body. He could not move any of his limbs save for his right leg. He quickly held another breath and stepped backward into the In-Between, where he shook out his limbs. The next step he took put him directly into a living room, and not mostly in the wall of said living room. He became aware that the singing had abruptly ceased at some point during this shenanigan. No doubt he had startled the elephant. He himself was a little startled as well; he doubted he’d ever get used to appearing inside walls and other solid objects.

The living room was unsettling because it was an exact copy of his own but completely bare. He figured that a small elephant could comfortably live here, and the lack of possessions was merely an effort to minimize safety hazard.

“Hello?” Mr. Grimace called. “It’s Mr. Grimace. I am just dropping by for a visit.”

All the tenants were familiar with this phrase; nearly all of them had been subject to a “visit” (normally just a quick apology as he often

accidentally ended up in someone else's rooms after coming back from a different plane. It was quite difficult to pinpoint the exact place he needed to exit a plane), and if they hadn't, they'd been warned to expect it at some point.

He heard movement from the bedroom down the hall, and a small noise of welcome accompanying it. Something appeared in the hallway, hidden by shadow. They stepped into the living room, into the light, and Mr. Grimace experienced a rare but very rude moment of pure shock. It rather felt like he'd been punched in the stomach.

It was not an elephant at all, but a man with a trumpet for a mouth.

"Oh--Hello," Mr. Grimace forced himself to say. It was quite difficult to wrangle the words from his lips, as they had suddenly just become even more twisted. His only thought was how miserable he'd be after the speaking gargoyle heard about this. All the confidence he had infused his curly voice with on the subject, invalid! Foolish! Oh, he was ruined!

The man standing across from Mr. Grimace lifted his hands and placed them upon the trumpet, playing a quick, driven handful of notes that sounded like a question.

"Yes, yes," Mr. Grimace said, sweat beading at his hairline, "I've just--" He hit a roadblock, tongue trapped in years of bad shocks and sour situations. He began to make choked noises, trying hard to force out an excuse for his presence.

The man with a trumpet for a mouth cut him off, playing more notes that to Mr. Grimace sounded comforting (at least, in comparison to his own pathetic noises).

"Thank you," he managed to say.

The man with a trumpet for a mouth had, in fact, said, "Having a conversation with you is more headache-inducing than having a conversation with my cousin thrice-removed, and she's a bagpipe! Poor fool!"

"I'll just be going now," Mr. Grimace said with great determina-

tion. “I am sorry to disturb you.”

Once he left the man with a trumpet for a mouth’s rooms, he exhaled. He only felt regret for the ridicule that would inevitably follow when he told everyone, including the speaking gargoyle, that he had been wrong all these years; there was no elephant. It *had* been a different plane, after all.

He shrugged.

He always had been tone deaf, anyway.

Anna Spreck  
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